
Information technology sector emerging in Tri-Cities

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With \$30 billion in revenue last year, Washington state has one of the highest concentrations of computer-related businesses in the nation, according to the Washington Software Alliance. Many of these firms are located in the Puget Sound area, anchored by Microsoft and other big names. But the Tri-Cities has been quietly undergoing its own information technology revolution. Business and community leaders have been strategically positioning the Tri-Cities IT sector for growth and success.

Just a decade ago, a handful of IT companies in the Tri-Cities was toiling along fairly independently of each other. Collaboration was not a high priority. Either the firms didn't see a business need for it, or they were too busy getting their fledgling companies up and running.

In the mid-1990s, dozens more IT startups began cropping up locally, mirroring national trends. The entrepreneurial founders usually had ties to the Tri-Cities and enjoyed the community's quality of life. Locally developed computer software, hardware and services began showing up in medical, agricultural, business and law enforcement industries worldwide. Local firms began receiving widespread media attention and industry awards.

But the emerging computer sector still didn't have much of a voice. Some startups desperately needed business advice, assistance and equity investment. Others couldn't find enough qualified IT workers. Everyone was concerned about keeping up with rapidly evolving technical developments. And community leaders were eyeing the opportunity to create what the computer industry calls an IT core, or cluster.

A few years ago, community and business leaders began taking steps to strengthen the IT sector. In 1996, Marv Erickson, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, led the effort to form a local chapter of the Washington Software Alliance. Now, the Southeastern Washington chapter, led by Dana Jensen of Lockheed Martin Services and Albert Torres of Pay Plus Benefits, holds monthly meetings with invited speakers from the region. Up to 80 participants learn about current software technologies, IT trends and business strategies, while networking with peers.

"The Southeastern Washington chapter has done a tremendous job of increasing the business sophistication of its members, which contributes to high-tech entrepreneurial success in the Tri-Cities," said Kathy Wilcox, president of the Washington Software Alliance.

New IT businesses often need hands-on nurturing. Last year, business and academic organizations created the Columbia Basin Advanced Technology Center, a 36,000-square-foot facility offering incubation space, business and funding support, testing, research, and educational support services to new IT companies. The facility is located between the Columbia Basin College campus and the Tri-

Cities airport in Pasco. Director Bill Murphy, a former Bainbridge Island attorney specializing in tech startups, welcomed the Center's first two tenants last fall. A business plan competition, which netted 27 entries, is offering winners free space at the Center plus business assistance. Winners will be selected in June.

PNNL extended its technical assistance program, targeting IT firms, with funding from CH2M Hill Hanford Group. The program offers no-cost technical help from PNNL engineers and scientists.

Local firms are starting to get more funding from organizations such as the Washington Technology Center and Spokane Intercollegiate Research and Technology Institute. A few are getting eyed by regional private investor and venture groups.

Last month, RTS Enabling Technologies, Fluor Federal Services and the Columbia Basin Advanced Technology Center started the Columbia Basin Internet Technologies User Group to support local e-businesses. Already at 60 members, the group focuses on applying the latest development applications and technologies for the Web.

Community leaders view the computer industry as a potential economic gold mine for the Tri-Cities. "The IT sector, with its ability to attract worldwide customers, can help support the Tri-Cities economy as federal budgets decrease," said Lockheed Martin's Frank Armijo. He said that each tech-sector job creates 3.7 more local jobs in other industries, such as retail, restaurants, health care and construction.

Last year the Tri-City Industrial Development Council formed a task force of business and community leaders to foster local IT growth. The task force identified more than 80 Tri-Cities companies employing more than 2,500 IT professionals.

Suppliers, educators and users represent thousands more jobs. A survey of 25 percent of these firms revealed four areas of greatest need: additional skilled workers, high-speed bandwidth, access to equity capital and the need to market our existing resources more effectively. Teams are working to address these issues.

An area that has received substantial attention already is education and training. Columbia Basin College and Washington State University Tri-Cities now offer an extensive array of degrees and certifications ranging from traditional computer science to database and network management. Lockheed Martin and other local companies have invested millions in scholarships, faculty positions and programs such as student internships and Internet Web camps.

All of these forces came together at the first all-day information technology seminar this month in Pasco. The event attracted more than 650 people, plus 40 local and national exhibitors.

For more on TRIDEC's IT task force, go to <http://www.tridec.org>. To download presentations and video clips of speakers from the April 18 symposium, or to see a

list of all local IT course offerings from elementary school through university level, go to <http://www.itbridgebuilder.org>.